

# Reflection on the Relationship between Cultural-historical Theory and Dialectics

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Challenging dominant positivistic psychology, Vygotsky elaborated cultural-historical theory in order to overcome the crisis in psychology. Spinoza's monism, Hegelian dialectics and Marx's materialistic dialectics inspired Vygotsky to develop a dialectical understanding of the development of higher mental functions. Dialectics as a way of thinking focuses on the study of each concrete object in its mutual connections with other objects, in its internal contradictions and in its process of change. Vygotsky criticized the understanding of dialectics as a sum of universal principles which can be applied in a direct way in the field of psychology and highlighted the complex relationships between philosophy and concrete scientific disciplines. Rethinking cultural-historical psychology in the light of dialectics offers a creative insight into crucial theoretical questions of psychology such as the interconnection between theory and practice, objectivist-subjectivist distinction, etc. Dialectical underpinnings of cultural-historical theory have been forgotten in mainstream, North-Atlantic interpretations and applications of Vygotsky's theory.

**Keywords:** dialectics, cultural-historical theory, Vygotsky, development, drama, crisis.

## Introduction

Two distinct but interconnected meanings of the title of the present paper may be distinguished. The first meaning refers to the necessity of studying the influence of dialectics in the formation of cultural-historical theory. The second meaning is related to the need to rethink cultural-historical theory from a dialectical perspective.

Firstly, I would like to state that due to a set of social and cognitive reasons, dialectics has disappeared from sight in the North Atlantic Academy. It is a real paradox that while social contradictions and conflicts have strengthened, philosophers and scholars tend to avoid dialectics as a mode of thinking that enables the study of the dynamics of these conflicts. Additionally, the hidden charm of postmodernism in western academy led to the

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rejection of the dialectic as one of the “*grand narratives of modernity*” [11].

Although the explanation of the negative stance in relation to the dialectical mode of thinking is out of the scope of this paper, I would like only to note that the increasing individualisation and fragmentation of social life in North America and Western Europe is not irrelevant to the lack of understanding of dialectics at the level of everyday life.

A similar situation occurs in post-perestroika Russia. Sokolova [15, p. 69] notes that “In post-perestroika Russia “dialectics” and “dialectical logic” are almost treated as dirty words...”. *Dialectics has been rejected by many Russian scholars as a result of an uncritical acceptance of the dominant ways of thinking in North Atlantic Academy.*

The difficulty of grasping the essence of cultural-historical theory in the context of its development is related to the lack of a dialectical mode of thinking and the tendency for its reception to be seen through the lens of the dominant ways of thinking in North Atlantic Academy. It is worth noting that “in order to introduce Vygotsky’s theory to world psychology the Western Vygotskians simplified and adapted the whole picture to the existing tradition” [19, p. 290]. The devaluation of the dialectic underpinnings of cultural-historical theory leads inevitably to oversimplification and misunderstanding. “In fact, the dominant version of Vygotsky’s theory in North American and West European psychology, with few exceptions...is a psychology in crisis because it is drained of its dialectics and consciousness is ignored” [8, p. 92–93].

### **Toward a dialectical approach to cultural historical theory**

The dialectical method focuses on the examination of things in their mutual connections, movement and development. Dialectics as a way of thinking grasps and represents the developmental process of a concrete object in its interconnections with other objects [13]. In contrast to widespread reductionism which focuses on analysis of the isolated elements of the reality, a dialectic approach is oriented toward grasping full complexity of interrelationships of the reality and contradictions that embodies them [2].

A dialectical understanding of cultural historical theory may be developed on the basis of the

investigation of three distinct but interwoven aspects: firstly, the historical context of the formation of cultural historical theory in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s, the dialectics of history that stimulated the formation such innovative theoretical approaches. Secondly, the crisis of psychology as a discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the dialectics of development of science that led to a radical change in the approach to the study of psychological processes. Thirdly, the dialectics of Vygotsky’s creative development as a personality involved in the process of radical reconstruction of psychological knowledge and building of a new theory in the domain of psychology.

The dialectics of history, the dialectics of the development of science and the dialectics of development of personality can be adequately understood only in their internal connection. The need for a radical transformation of science was not an exclusively internal cognitive project, but it was emerged as a result of a conflict between existing psychological theories and tasks that arise in social practice in the concrete social context. Naturalistic and individualistic theories couldn’t deal with social challenges in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia (elimination of illiteracy, promotion of social solidarity, foundation of social education, etc.). Vygotsky, the founder of cultural historical theory, was actively involved in the practice of building a new society, as well as in the process of critical reflection of psychology as a discipline from the perspective of social and scientific tasks that arise in the concrete historical and cognitive context. Thus Vygotsky’s book “Historical meaning of crisis of psychology” was a critical reflection of psychology from the perspective of radical social practice. Following philosophical traditions of Spinoza, Hegel and Marx, Vygotsky attempted to found a monistic, dialectical, materialistic epistemology of practice. He used as an epigraph of his book the words from the Bible (Psalm 118: 22, 23): “the stone which the builders rejects is become the headstone of the corner” [27, p. 233]. For Vygotsky, both social practice and dialectical philosophy were the stones that were ignored by the builders.

Hegelian dialectic was called by Russian thinker Herzen the “algebra of revolution”. Hegel offered a brilliant analysis of great societal changes and their influence on the development of human thought “...it is not difficult to see that ours

is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation”[9, pp. 6–7]. Vygotsky lived in a time of radical societal transformation and his cultural-historical theory may be considered a response to challenges of his time and an attempt to be involved actively in the process of societal change. From that perspective, Vygotsky’s interest in dialectics was related to his attempt to conceptualize and promote radical societal change. “Our science could not and cannot develop in the old society. We cannot master the truth about personality and personality itself so long as mankind has not mastered the truth about society and society itself. In contrast, in the new society our science will take a central place in life. “The leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom’ inevitably puts the question of the mastery of our own being, of its subjection to the self on the agenda” [27, p. 342].

The need to study dialectics seriously derived from the crisis in psychology as a discipline in the early 20th century and the need to develop an alternative to surpass it. Various formulations of the crisis in psychology have been developed in that historical and scientific context (Bühler, Politzer, Driesch, Koffka, Husserl, etc.).

In early Soviet psychology in the 1920-s the first attempts to overcome the crisis in psychology on the basis of a dialectical framework emerged. For example, Kornilov [10] attempted to consider psychology in the light of dialectical materialism. Vygotsky offered a totally different perspective of the application of the dialectical method in psychology in his manuscript “The historical Meaning of the crisis in psychology” [27; 28].

Vygotsky’s understanding of dialectics was formed under the influence of Engels’ work “Dialectics of Nature” that was published in the USSR in 1925 and also the debate between “dialecticians” (or “Deborinists”) and “mechanists” on possibilities of the application of dialectics in concrete sciences.

Vygotsky argues that “Dialectics covers nature, thinking, history – it is the most general, maximally universal science. The theory of the psychological materialism or dialectics of psychology is what I called general psychology” [27,

p. 330]. However, Vygotsky criticized the attempts of a direct application of dialectics in psychology that were made in his time: “...they are looking, firstly, in the wrong place; secondly, for the wrong thing; thirdly, in the wrong manner” [27, p. 313].

Davydov and Radzikhovski argued that despite the intention of the application of dialectic in psychology, “...formal logic prevailed both before and after Vygotsky’s time” [5, p. 61]. The reconstruction of the Dialectical Logic of K. Marx’s “Capital” took place in 1960 (Rosental, Ilyenkov, Vazioulin, etc.). In the 1920-s early 1930-s the problem of the application of dialectics in psychology was posed by Vygotsky but it wasn’t solved.

The failure to resolve the problem of the application of dialectics in psychology reveals both its complexity and the deep character of the crisis in psychology. The concept of the crisis in psychology was developed by Vygotsky on the basis of a dialectical account of the development of science: “Science commences to be understood dialectically in its movement, i.e., from the perspective of its dynamics, growth, development, evolution. It is from this point of view that we must evaluate and interpret each stage of development.” [27, p. 292].

It is worth noting also that Vygotsky’s reflection of the crisis in psychology from a dialectical perspective preceded the appearance of cultural historical theory. The elaboration of cultural-historical theory was impossible without an epistemological and methodological analysis of the state of the crisis in psychology as a discipline.

The roots of the crisis in psychology lay in the failure of Cartesian dualism to offer an adequate treatment of the core ontological, epistemological, methodological questions that emerged in contemporary psychological research. Both Spinozian monism and Hegelian dialectics offer Vygotsky a creative insight in order to elaborate a theoretical framework to overcome dualism in psychology.

Usually Vygotsky’s theory is considered as a sum of readymade, pre-given ideas that can be directly applied in different domains. An instrumental reception of cultural historical theory as a finalized system of readymade ideas comes into conflict with Vygotsky’s creative development. The process of the formation and transformation of Vygotsky’s theory during his life time may be adequately understood from a dialectical perspective.

During his short life Vygotsky continuously revised and transformed his own theory. The very process of the development of Vygotsky's scientific programme in Lakatos' terms may be considered as the most important part of his legacy. In other words, Vygotsky's creative and dramatic journey is more important, rather than his concrete conclusions. "What endures most in his legacy are not the results of his empirical inquiries, but the portrait he paints of the mind and its development, together with his reflections on the nature of psychological explanation" [1, p. 51]. Vygotsky's theory may be dialectically grasped as a developmental process with dramatic tensions and conflicts, discontinuities and radical changes.

In contrast to the dominant discourse that represents Vygotskian theory as a homogenous corpus of knowledge that might be directly applied in empirical research, I argue that discontinuities and turning points might be found in the development of Vygotsky's theory during his short life course. "...a shift of ascent (or epochs of development) is possible in human life as in a drama or a tragedy, and each of them lasts for several years" [32, p. 8].

Vygotsky changed radically his philosophical and scientific outlook at least three times. The transition from subjectivism and idealism to objectivism and materialism under the influence of the October Revolution (1919–1920) was the first turning point in Vygotsky's life. Vygotsky came from the domain of humanities to psychology as an outsider. He accepted reflexology and behaviorism which were widespread forms of natural scientific thinking in the 1920-s in the USSR, but he never identified himself completely with them<sup>1</sup>. The second turning point was linked with Vygotsky's transition from reflexology and behaviorism to cultural historical theory (1927). In contrast to dominant naturalistic accounts in psychology, Vygotsky focused on the investigation of the *cultural development of higher mental functions* [20]. The primary appearance of cultural historical theory became possible because of Vygotsky's persistence to apply the dialectical approach to the field of psychology. This trend was especially strong in Vygotsky's work "The historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology".

The third turning point occurs as a result of Vygotsky's dissatisfaction with his own theory

and his attempt to reformulate it in a new way (1932). Criticizing his own previous intellectualism, Vygotsky elaborated a set of concepts such as the psychological systems, meaning, unity of the affective and intellectual processes, "perezhivanie", etc. in order to develop an integrative, monistic and dialectical theory of consciousness and human subjectivity.

Two main approaches to the construction of psychological knowledge (objectivism, subjectivism) were reproduced in Vygotsky's ontogenetic development. It was not a simple repetition or recapitulation, but a critical reflection on the possibilities and limitations of these approaches from the perspective of social and scientific tasks that arise in the concrete context through the lens of Vygotsky's personal development. None of the above approaches could deal with the social challenges of post-revolutionary Soviet Russia. Criticizing both objectivism and subjectivism in his unfinished manuscript "The Historical Meaning of Psychological Crisis", Vygotsky not only revealed the limitations of the dominant psychological discourse, but also disapproved his previous views [22].

Cultural – historical theory was not a pure individual endeavor, but rather a collaborative project. The cultural-historical school has been defined as a "collaborative, multi-generational, value-laden, and ideologically-driven investigative project that stretched far beyond the confines of science in its traditional mentalist guise" [16, p. 96]. Vygotsky's personal development was internally connected with the broader process of social change in the Soviet Union in the 1920s – early 1930s as well as with the development of his own scientific school.

### **Cultural-historical theory and the dialectical concept of development**

Cultural-historical theory emerged as a theory of the development of higher mental functions. In contrast to "surface psychology" (behaviorism) and "depth psychology" (psychoanalysis), Vygotsky attempted to create a "height psychology" [31, p. 351; 14, p. v] by focusing on the possibilities of humans to become consciously creators of both themselves and the world. In contrast to psychological theories that emphasize the actual level of human functioning, Vygotsky

<sup>1</sup> A deep investigation of this period of Vygotsky's creative development has been accomplished by Veresov (1999).

elaborated a future oriented theory of human development.

Taking into account Hegelian and Marxist insights of dialectics, Vygotsky formulated the concept of development as the core concept of cultural historical theory.

"We need to concentrate not to the *product* of development but on the very *process* by which higher forms are established.... To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes—from birth to death—fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for "it is only in movement that a body shows what it is." Thus, the historical [that is, in the broadest sense of "history"] study of behavior is not an auxiliary aspect of theoretical study, but rather forms its very base" [26, pp. 64–65].

Dialectics may be considered as a type of thinking that examines a thing in its interconnection with other things and in the process of its change and development. For Vygotsky, development is not a gradual accumulation of quantitative changes or a simple natural growth, but a qualitative transformation that takes place as a result of internal conflicts and crises and attempts of concrete subjects to resolve them. "Cultural-historical theory allows to study not only stages of development but to investigate development as a *process* of transitions from one stage to another through revolutionary qualitative changes and re-organisations" [21, p. 219].

Human development was examined by Vygotsky as a contradictory unity of progression and regression, integration and disintegration, rather than a linear progression or an accumulation of quantitative changes. "In fact, one of Vygotsky's core achievements was that he substituted for the fixed, preformist views on development the notion that development exists in flux and constant change, with fluid and ever-changing, open-ended dynamical processes linking organisms and their environments" [17, p. 478].

In contrast to reductionist examination of separated mental functions, Vygotsky introduced the concept of psychological systems on the basis of a synthetic account of human functioning. Psychological systems were presented by Vygotsky as historically developing, changing formations, that include dynamically interconnected mental functions, rather than static Gestalts.

Vygotsky focused mainly on the investigation of the *progressive* development of higher mental functions. However, in the last few years of his life Vygotsky demonstrated interest in the study of *regression*, in terms of returning to a previous level of development as a result of the breakdown of the systemic organization mental functions.

"...if Vygotsky's idea of developmental dialectical synthesis is followed with rigor it is not possible for any organism to regress to a *previous* stage/state of development. Instead, the organism may become transformed from a higher to a lower state or stage, but that would *not* constitute retracing of a previously traversed path in development" [18, p. 176].

In contrast to evolutionist and mechanist conceptions, a dialectical understanding of development might be conceptualized in terms of collisions, conflicts and crises. Especially the concept of crisis is crucial in the study of Vygotsky's theory [4]. Vygotsky used the concept of crisis for the conceptualization not only of the process of development of psychological knowledge, but also for the investigation of human development. The crisis is not reduced to transitions from one age to another (crisis of 1 year, crisis of 3, crisis of 7 years, etc.) in literature. Vygotsky *believed* that "Crises are not a temporary condition, but the way of inner life" [30, p. 25]. For Vygotsky, the concept of crisis was more than a scientific term. It was a way of conceptualizing his own life experience. Vygotsky experienced the Jewish pogrom in his childhood, the death of his mother and brother from tuberculosis, medical crises as a result of his own disease, the crisis of his own scientific school, strong and unfair criticism of his theory, etc.).

The concept of the crisis as a result of internal conflicts was developed by Vygotsky on the basis of a dialectical mode of thinking that stands opposite to individualistic ways of thinking. Rejecting individualistic ways of thinking, Vygotsky elaborated the concept of the social situation of development that refocuses on unique, dynamic relations between the child and social reality that surrounds him. The social situation of development "...determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the ba-

sis source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual” [28, p. 198]. From a dialectical standpoint, human development becomes possible only on the basis of dynamic, dramatic interrelations between concrete subjects and society that could not be reduced to their external interactions. The dynamic, dramatic interrelations between concrete subjects and society are not reduced to an adaptation of subjects to social environment as has been accepted in mainstream North Atlantic psychology.

“The first such factor is always, as psychological analysis has established, the human need to adapt to the environment. If life surrounding him does not present challenges to an individual, if his usual and inherent reactions are in complete equilibrium with the world around him, then there will be no basis for him to exercise creativity. A creature that is perfectly adapted to its environment, would not want anything, would not have anything to strive for, and, of course, would not be able to create anything” [24, p. 28–29].

Challenging the concept of adaptation, Vygotsky proposed the idea of creative, future oriented activity, that “...makes the human being a creature oriented toward the future, creating the future and thus altering his own present” [24, p. 9]. The concept of adaptation is oriented to actual, present forms of human being, while *dialectical understanding of development emphasizes human potentialities, creating the future and transforming the present forms of human being.*

*The development of the range of human potentialities through co-creation of meanings within social practice may be considered as an essential dimension of cultural historical theory.* In contrast to functionalistic accounts of mental states, cultural historical theory has been oriented to the promotion of the “buds” or “flowers” rather than the “fruits” of development in Vygotsky’s terms [29, p.42]. Vygotsky focused mainly on changing becoming, rather than on an isolated and static being.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, a dialectical understanding of cultural historical theory is based on its examination as a developing, collaborative unfinished project that has emerged in a dramatic and creative period of radical social change.

Inspired by Hegelian and Marxist accounts of dialectics, Vygotsky developed a cultural historical theory that opens up new perspectives for the rethinking and overcoming of the crisis in psychology. In contrast to dominant psychological theories that describe the actual developmental level and presents forms of human being, cultural historical theory illuminates prospective human development. Human becoming may be described from a cultural historical perspective in terms of a drama. “**A drama truly full of internal struggle is impossible in organic systems:** the dynamic of the personality is drama... A drama cannot be otherwise, i.e., it is a **clash of systems. Psychology is “humanized”**” [23, p. 67].

Despite Vygotsky’s essential contributions to the formation of a dialectical understanding of core theoretical and methodological issues of psychology as a discipline, the application of dialectics in psychology remains an open-ended unsolved question. 90 years later, Vygotsky’s statement that “...psychology nowadays is a psychology before *Das Kapital*” [27, p. 342] remains valid.

Although Vygotsky was been inspired by the dialectical insights of Hegel, Marx, Engels etc., “...he failed to systemize them in a unified integrative theoretical framework. The main difficulty lies in the hopeless ambiguity of integrating Marxist philosophical concepts into psychological concepts...” [8, p. 278]. Even nowadays serious methodological and theoretical issues still remains unresolved, such as whether it is possible to apply the method of ascendance from the abstract to the concrete for the construction of a system of psychological concepts. It also remains ambiguous what the relationship is between a logical and historical method of research for the study of psychological processes.

Perhaps the most challenging dimension of this problem is that the application of dialectics to concrete disciplines requires the substantial development of the dialectics itself. The change of dialectics in the process of its application to concrete disciplines constitutes a vast terra incognita waiting to be explored. The further development of dialectics is required for the conceptualization of growing social contradictions and promotion of social change.

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## Отражение отношений между культурно-исторической теорией и диалектикой

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Бросая вызов доминирующей позитивистской психологии, Л.С. Выготский разработал культурно-историческую теорию в целях преодоления кризиса в психологии. *Монизм Спинозы*, диалектика Гегеля и диалектический материализм Маркса вдохновили Выготского разработать диалектическое понимание развития высших психических функций. Диалектика как способ мышления сосредоточена на изучении каждого конкретного объекта в его взаимных связях с другими объектами, в его внутренних противоречиях и в процессе изменений. Выготский критиковал понимание диалектики как совокупности универсальных принципов, которые можно напрямую использовать в сфере психологии, и подчеркивал сложное взаимодействие философии с конкретными научными дисциплинами. Переосмысление культурно-исторической психологии в свете диалектики предполагает творческое представление о важнейших теоретических вопросах психологии, таких как взаимосвязь между теорией и практикой, объективистско-субъективистские различия и т.д. Диалектические основы культурно-исторической теории были забыты в господствующей Северо-Атлантической интерпретации и при использовании теории Выготского.

**Ключевые слова:** диалектика, культурно-историческая теория, Выготский, развитие, драма, кризис.

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